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Article

# Metapolitical New Right Influencers: The Case of Brittany Pettibone

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**Abstract:** Far-right movements, activists, and political parties are on the rise worldwide. Several scholars connect this rise of the far-right at least partially to the affordances of digital media and to a new digital metapolitical battle. A lot has been written about the far-right's adoption of trolling, harassment, and meme-culture in their metapolitical strategy, but researchers have focused less on how far-right vloggers are using the practices of influencer culture for metapolitical goals. This paper tries to fill this gap and bring new theoretical insights based on a digital ethnographic case study. By analyzing political YouTuber and #pizzagate propagator Brittany Pettibone, this paper contributes to our understanding of radicalization processes in relation to the use of digital media.

**Keywords:** Brittany Pettibone; new right; metapolitics; influencer; metapolitical influencer

## 1. Introduction

Far-right movements, activists and political parties are on the rise worldwide. Organic and even blood and soil nationalism, radical new right regionalism, anti-feminism, homophobia, racism, and anti-migration rhetoric are moving from the margins to the mainstream (Nagle 2017; Maly 2018a; Tufekci 2018; Russel 2019; Fielitz and Thurston 2019). Several scholars connect this rise of the far-right at least partially to the affordances of digital media and to a new digital (meta)-political battle (Nagle 2017; Lewis 2018; Maly 2018a, 2019a, 2020a). Mainstream digital media like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are used by radical right and far-right actors in connection to niched websites, boards, crowd funding platforms, click farms, bot-networks, and alt-tech to engage in a metapolitical battle: a cultural or ideological war for hegemony.

The appropriation of digital culture and digital technologies has changed the metapolitics of the far-right. Not only the intellectual, but also the activist, the politician and the prosumer are now imagined as part of the new right metapolitical battle. Much has been written about the far right's adoption of meme-culture (Nagle 2017; Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Maly 2019a), LARPing (the ironic and metapolitical use Live Action role Playing in order to do or say things that are too outrageous for normies) (Tuters 2019), harassment (Conversi 2012), and trolling (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir 2019) in their metapolitical strategy, but researchers have focused less on how far-right vloggers are using the practices of influencer culture for metapolitical goals (Lewis 2018 being an exception).

This paper tries to fill this gap and brings new theoretical insights based on a digital ethnographic case study. Influencer strategies are next to harassment, fear, exclusion, denial, and negation (Maly 2018a; Conversi 2020), key in understanding contemporary far-right mobilization. By analyzing political YouTuber and #pizzagate propagator Brittany Pettibone<sup>1</sup> as a case, this paper

<sup>1</sup> After her marriage with Martin Sellner—a key figure within the pan-European identitarian movement Generation Identity—Pettibone has adopted his last name and is now known as Brittany Sellner. Throughout the paper, from a coherence perspective, I have opted to use the name Brittany Pettibone instead of Brittany Sellner.

contributes to our understanding of radicalization processes in relation to digital media. This research starts by understanding the role of culture and the niched nature of contemporary radicalization processes (Maly 2018a). People do not radicalize in relation to abstract phenomena, but in relation to (a network of) very specific individuals, websites, channels, and discourses. The Trump campaign under Steve Bannon succeeded in connecting several of these niches together (the so-called alt-right, incels, #maga-activists, 4channers, anti-feminists, pizzagaters, ...) in one movement (Nagle 2017; Maly 2018a). Brittany Pettibone is one of those figures around which a transnational niche came into being. She played a key role in bringing to prominence the #pizzagate conspiracy theory and has since built a large following and a prominent status among far-right activists around the world. She is working on a transnational scale and has a truly global following.

Pettibone uses the action and meaning making possibilities of different mainstream digital media like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube and adopts the practices of influencers to further a metapolitical agenda. With more than 30,500 followers on Instagram, 154,200 followers on Twitter and 137,000 subscribers on YouTube (30 June 2020), Pettibone has created a niched media empire for herself. And this in less than four years' time. In the first two sections of this paper I will explain my theoretical framework and key notions like metapolitics, after which I will further zoom in on the adoption of "influencer culture" for metapolitical goals. In the third section, I will explain my methodology, digital ethnography, after which I will introduce the case study.

## 2. Metapolitics in a Post-Digital World

In the 21st century, the concept of metapolitics has been taken up by new right and identitarian movements in the US and Europe (Nagle 2017; Hawley 2017; Maly 2018a; Zienkowski 2019). Several key figures<sup>2</sup> of the alt-right in the US and the identitarian movements in Europe argue that metapolitics is at the heart of the new right cultural construction of a future society. The new right idea of metapolitics goes back to Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE), the "school of thought" led by Alain de Benoist, better known as *La Nouvelle Droite*, in the 20th century (Bar-On 2013). Central to the metapolitics of *La Nouvelle Droite* was the Gramscian idea that culture and ideas need to be produced first to realize political change in the long-term. Or, more concretely, in order to build a post-liberal, post-democratic society in the future, intellectuals should start to produce and circulate ideas.

Key figures in the global new right network explicitly refer to the project of *La Nouvelle Droite* and the theoreticians Alain de Benoist and especially Guillaume Faye as guides in understanding metapolitics. Martin Sellner—now the husband of Brittany Pettibone and head of the Identitarian movement—dedicated a series of five videos on the metapolitical dictionary of Guillaume Faye. Greg Johnson, editor in chief of the far-right American publishing house Counter-Currents not only looked at *La Nouvelle Droite* as an example for building a North American New Right, he highlights the importance of the concept of metapolitics for the North American New Right. Daniel Friberg, CEO and co-founder of the influential new right publishing house Arktos, not only publishes the works of Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye (including his metapolitical dictionary) and Generation Identity, he himself stresses the importance of new right metapolitics. In his handbook for the true opposition, Friberg stresses that 'Any political struggle must be preceded, legitimized, and supported by a metapolitical struggle'<sup>3</sup>. This metapolitical battle is about "strategy" and ideology. 'The deepest work of the

<sup>2</sup> Friberg, D. 2015. *The Real Right Returns. A Handbook for the True Opposition*. London: Arktos; Friberg, D. 2017. 'Metapolitics from the right', *Altright.com*. <https://altright.com/2017/09/23/metapolitics-from-the-right/>; Spencer, Richard. 2017. 'What it means to be Alt-Right. A meta-political manifesto', *Altright.com*, (2017b), <https://altright.com/2017/08/11/what-it-means-to-be-alt-right/> and Kirkpatrick, James. 2014. 'An American Defense Worker Suggests Four Ways Americans Can Fight Back Against The Rule Of Judge.' *VDARE*, (2014), <https://vdare.com/letters/an-american-defense-worker-suggests-four-ways-americans-can-fight-back-against-the-rule-of-judges>

<sup>3</sup> Friberg, D. 2017. 'Metapolitics from the right', *Altright.com*. <https://altright.com/2017/09/23/metapolitics-from-the-right/>

*metapolitician of the Right*’, says Leonard, is, ‘*necessarily anti-democratic: he seeks to produce a society in which metapolitics, save in its conservative aspect, no longer exists.*’ At its core, every new right metapolitical project is about the production and hegemonization of an ideology that rejects liberal democracy, the left and the (radical) Enlightenment tradition in general.

Digitalization has fundamentally reshaped and re-organized the (meta)-political field and the media field in general. Whereas the far-right has always used digital media to propagate their ideologies (Winter 2019), the metapolitization of the far-right (Griffin 2008, p. 195) in the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017) has changed the form, content and strategies that are being used today. In his seminal work, Chadwick argues that we now see a ‘*chaotic transition period*’ in which “old media” and “newer media logics” interact with and are interdependent among each other. The result of this interaction and interdependence in the reflexively connected social fields of media and politics is what he labels as the ‘*hybrid media system*’ (Chadwick 2017, p. Xi). Within that system, different actors—be it politicians, influencers, journalists, activists, or alternative media—try to ‘*create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings.*’ (Chadwick 2017, p. xi).

Digital media enable metapolitical actors to potentially have an impact in the whole hybrid media system. In the last few years, we have seen that the alt-right and 4chan trolls have been successfully trolling mainstream media in order to amplify their message (Phillips 2018). Identitarian movements remediatize small but spectacular offline interventions by uploading videos on social media in the hope that mainstream media would report on them (Maly 2019a). In a similar vein, the far-right has carefully and strategically mobilized the media ideology surrounding Google by adopting Search Engine Optimization to make sure their sites rank high on certain search terms and exploit the potential of data voids (Arnstad 2015; Golebiewski and boyd 2019; Maly 2019c). This new media landscape affects the agenda setting process. While mainstream media is still important in this hybrid system, they have become weaker in determining what is important and what is not and in constructing a consensus. In this interdependent and asymmetrical hybrid media system, salience is transferred among political actors, media platforms and public groups and is thus hybridized. Such hybrid forms of salience, argue Maniou and Bantimaroudis (2018, p. 4) ‘*should be approached as indices of mediated significance derived from interdependent and asymmetrical distributions of media power, divided between mainstream media outlets as well as grassroots digital platforms including various in-between hybrid media formations.*’ This hybrid salience does not deny the agenda setting role of legacy media, but it does highlight the different metapolitical options that the hybrid media system has given rise to. Being able to steer the information flows and making mainstream media work for their cause is a bonus for far-right activists, but not necessary anymore. Alt-right activists have set up a whole ecology of their own platforms for metapolitical goals: they not only have their own websites and blogs, but also upload podcasts and vlogs on mainstream platforms like YouTube and use social media to find an audience.

### 3. Metapolitical Influencers

In general, we see that the metapolitical strategy of the new right is focused on a deep integration in the digital mainstream. New right activists try to use the digital mainstream platforms as leverage to reach new audiences. Even though many new right activists openly criticize the “left-wing” bias of Zuckerberg and Dorsey, in practice we see that they try to conform to the (literal reading) of the community standards of these social media. As a result of this interaction between activists and platforms we see new (metapolitical) practices (Maly 2018a, 2018c, 2019b) and new norms and cultures (Hou 2019) emerging. One of these cultural practices is what is known as “influencer,” “micro-celebrity,” or “social media celebrity” culture (Lewis 2018). Marwick, together with boyd and Senft, argues that micro-celebrity should be understood as ‘*a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others, use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans*’ (Marwick and boyd 2011; Senft 2013; Marwick 2015).

This “edited self,” as García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes (2019) call it, is at the same time a product of the internal norms of each community (shaping its discourses, styles, looks, and ideologies) and

the technical affordances and the media-ideologies connected to the platform (visible in its community standards and norms), and the intrinsic features of online content. Influencer culture is thus a socio-technical assemblage: the voice and performance of the social media influencer is not entirely “free,” but a product of socio-technologic interaction between the vlogger, the platform(s), his or her followers, and the larger niche in which the influencer acts.

Micro-celebrity culture finds its material base in the technological programming of the digital infrastructures. Influencers are an integral part of the so-called attention-economy or what Venturini calls the ‘*economy of virality*’ (Venturini 2019, p. 133). They capture the attention of the users and activate them (García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2019). Audience labour (Fisher 2015), or more specifically, the interaction between people, interfaces, and algorithms, is the fundament of the contemporary digital economy. This audience labour and attention is measured, quantified, and standardized in the form of “reach,” “views,” “interactions,” “likes,” and “shares.” Together with tracking cookies and third-party data, they enable platforms to collect and reconfigure all that data into predictive modelling in order to create a more personalized experience for users, and of course to monetize them (Zuboff 2019).

In order to be fully integrated in this economy of virality and thus generate uptake (Maly 2020c), metapolitical influencers need to be media literate. They need to develop specific strategies to make use of the affordances and algorithms of the different media (and their specific media logics) to build an audience and/or community (Varis and Hou 2020, p. 231). Digital affordances are thus socio-technical affordances: they refer to the action-taking possibilities and meaning-making opportunities<sup>4</sup> that the technical capabilities of a platform enable. These interfaces steer the behaviour of users, but don’t determine it. Media ideologies—the ideas that people form about the workings of a media platform and its algorithms—will shape the behaviour and practices of the users (Gershon 2010). Concretely, as the functioning of the algorithms of the different platforms is not known by anybody outside of the company that builds them, the acquiring of media literacy is based on an ‘*algorithmic imaginary*’ (Bucher 2015). This imaginary is constructed on the basis of practical experience and the careful monitoring of metrics: the number of likes, shares, followers, viewers, and comments. These “vanity metrics,” as Rogers (2018) calls them, not only give birth to the culture of influencers and social media celebrities, they also bring into life *networks of influence*. The more people follow an influencer, the more chances that their content will be liked, shared, and distributed in the network. These networks of influence (Jacobson et al. 2019)—within an attention economy—not only have economic value (in terms of data production and usefulness for marketing campaigns), they also have metapolitical value: they contribute to the spread of metapolitical ideas.

#### 4. Scope of Study

Measuring influence is usually done using quantitative measurements—and in this sense reduplicates the assumption inherent in the vanity metrics and the attention economy in general. Even though there are other models to quantitatively study “influence” and impact (Rogers 2018), a digital ethnographic approach focusing on the production and uptake of metapolitical discourse can contribute to a more detailed and empirical understanding of how the contemporary digital ecology contributes to the radicalization of certain individuals or groups.

I will use the case method in this paper. In an ethnographic approach, a case method is understood as ‘*a methodology in which one uses case analyses to demonstrate theory*’ (Blommaert and Dong 2010). A case study is thus not just about describing a case, an event, an incident. The case is used to make one or more theoretical claims. It is ‘*a case of something*.’ In this paper, I will focus on how Brittany Pettibone uses digital media to wage a metapolitical battle. Pettibone is only one of many new right and radical right influencers—one can also think of her husband, Martin Sellner, but also people like Stefan Molyneux, Sargon of Akkad, Millennial Woes, The Golden One, Lauren Southern,

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, d. boyd, it’s complicated. The social lives of networked teens, and R.V.K, Vatrappu, Towards a Theory of Socio-technical Interactions (2009). Lecture Notes in Computer Science, doi:10.1007/978-3-642-04636-0\_70

Richard Spencer, Joseph Paul Watson, Infowars, and many more. Together, they form a whole network of right-wing actors (see Lewis 2018; Maly 2018a). The outcome of an ethnographic case study—and thus of the theoretization of the data—is theory. The insights of this paper are thus not limited to this individual case, but can in relation to the findings in other cases, be generalized (see for instance also Maly 2019a).

A digital ethnographic approach (Varis 2016) also helps us to move beyond any technological determinism which is so popular today in explaining the role of technology in radicalization. In many accounts on online radicalization, one seems to blame “the recommendation algorithms.” The algorithms are seen as the main or maybe even the only actor that is responsible for the promotion of racism (Noble 2018) or constructing a “rabbit hole” and promoting “radicalization” (Roose 2019). Digital media scholar Tufekci, for instance, called the YouTube algorithm a great radicalizer and YouTube ‘*Given its billion or so users’ (...)* ‘one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century’ (Tufekci 2018). Such claims give readers the impression that those recommendation algorithms work independently and overrule human agency. New research shows that YouTube’s recommendation mechanism does not promote inflammatory or radicalized content (Ledwich and Zaitsev 2020). Both claims do rely on a technological determinism, as they seem to understand the algorithms as completely independent actors. By adopting an ethnographic interactionist approach, the focus is not on the algorithms and the platforms alone, but on what people do with interfaces and algorithms. It brings human (and non-human) agency in the picture when trying to understand radicalization processes in relation to digital media.

This digital ethnographic case study is part of a long-term digital ethnographic and discourse analytic project studying far-right political parties and movements and how they use digital media (Maly 2012, 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). It is mainly based on data collection through long-term observation between 2017 and 2020 of Pettibone’s YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram accounts and her book ‘What makes us girls’<sup>5</sup>. This is accompanied by live ethnography (Chadwick 2017; Maly 2019a), the use of the digital archive of Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram and digital tools like Social Blade, TwitterTrails, and the Wayback machine. My analysis not only focuses on the content Brittany Pettibone produces, but also on the interaction between her metapolitical influencer practices, digital technologies, and digital culture in order to generate uptake.

## 5. The Rise of Brittany Pettibone

As already mentioned above, Brittany Pettibone started her social media life as an aspiring author in search for a publisher. Even though she registered a Twitter account in 2011, the first tweet that can be found on her account dates from 2014. Up until 11 October 2016, most of her Tweets were “unpolitical.” More even, most of them have one or two likes at best. Her tweets struggled to find an audience. And then, mid-October 2016, seemingly out of nowhere, a series of explicitly political tweets emerged. The first one, referring to Kanye West’s support for Trump, was still understated. The second tweet linked to an article of culture war veteran Pat Buchanan. In the article, Buchanan supports Trump’s performance in the October 2016 debate against Hillary Clinton (see Figure 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Pettibone, B. 2018. *What makes us girls: and why it’s all worth it*. Adelaide: Reason books.



**Figure 1.** First explicit political tweet from Brittany Pettibone—October 2016.

This tweet indexes Pettibone's integration in an already existing political niche with a large online presence. The use of MSM to speak about the mainstream media and the framing of mainstream media, Hollywood and the "political class" as "the elite" that fights "the outsider" Donald Trump shows a deep intertextuality with the paleoconservative and alt-right niche in the US (Maly 2018a). Furthermore, the fact that she knows or encounters the blog of Buchanan is another index of the political context in which she produces her voice. From the early start of her political influencer career, she is clearly knowledgeable of far-right culture in the US and reproduces existing frames, words, and known figureheads in the far-right scene in the country. For instance, she also tweeted a link to the controversial right-wing Project Veritas YouTube video<sup>6</sup> on 'Democrats rigging the election.' The Veritas project is known to be linked to the entourage of Trump<sup>7</sup>. The first tweet that really took off saw Pettibone targeting what she understood as the 'normalization of paedophilia' (see Figure 2). Thirty-two people liked this tweet and 63 retweeted it. The next 16 tweets were all explicitly political, dealing with topics such as "Trump," "Assange," "Crooked Hillary and the wrongdoings of the Clintons," "anti-Globalism," the rigged "MSM," and pro-Trump stances in the context of the 2016 elections. Topics that again all put her firmly within the pro-Trump network and the campaign topics steered by Steve Bannon.

<sup>6</sup> Project Veritas Action. 2016. Rigging the Election—Video II: Mass Voter Fraud. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDc8PVCvfKs&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>7</sup> Mazzetti, Mark and Goldman Adam. 2020. Erik Prince recruits ex spies to help infiltrate liberal groups. *The New York Times*.



**Figure 2.** First tweet generating some uptake.

Pettibone was clearly looking and trying to generate uptake for her tweets. One of her tactics was, at first without much success, to reach out to key figures within the alternative influence network (Lewis 2018). In the weeks after this post (Figure 3), Pettibone starts reacting to posts of already established far-right influencers, white nationalist trolls, far-right journalists and conspiracy thinkers like Stefan Molyneux, The Ricky Vaughn, Jack Posobiec, and Joseph Paul Watson.

Another tactic was using more and more hashtags. Hashtag tactics (Bonnin 2020) or carefully mobilizing hashtags on Twitter is crucial to prolong the visibility of a post and tap into new audiences. Hashtags also '*simultaneously function semiotically by marking the intended significance of an utterance*' (Rosa and Bonilla 2015). This double function of the hashtag helps generate uptake within a very specific niche. The importance of hashtag tactics (and an existing follower base) becomes clear when we see that the uptake of the repost of the same article (Figure 2) and status on the normalization of pedophilia on 29 November 2016. This repost happens when she already has secured her place within the new right network, and uses the #pizzagate hashtag. The repost now generated 1,3K shares, 891 likes and over 400 comments.

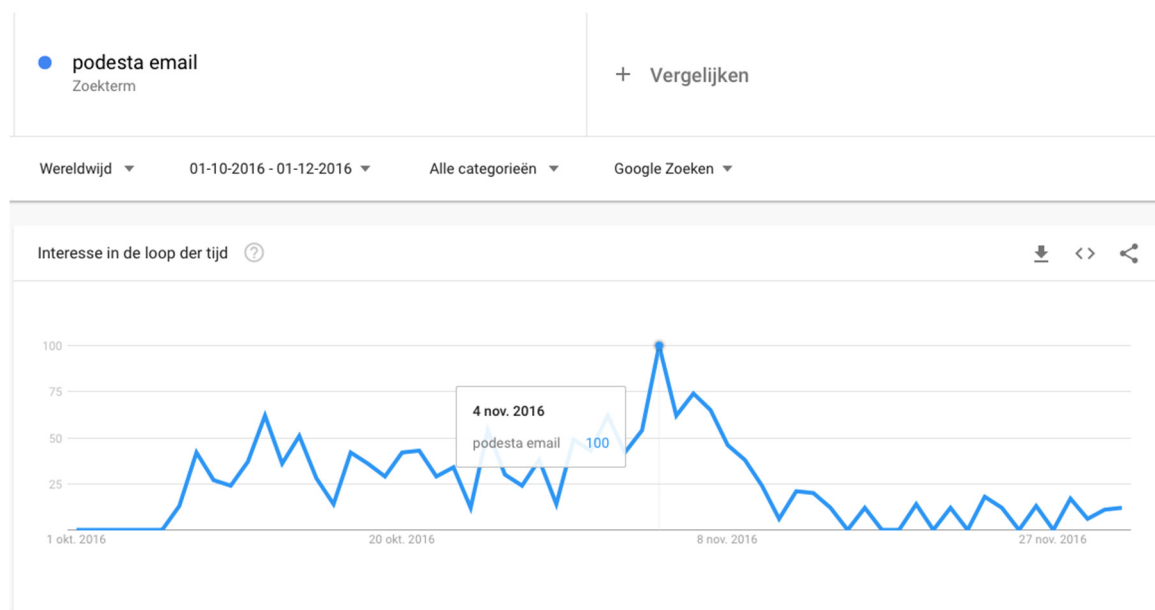




Figure 3. First “Podesta” tweet from Pettibone.

The real breakthrough moment of Pettibone on Twitter occurred when she started to engage with the Podesta emails. In October and November 2016, Wikileaks released 20,000 emails allegedly from Podesta, an American political consultant with close relations with the Clintons and the Democratic party. Pettibone very quickly surfed on the hype surrounding the Podesta email leak and mobilized several hashtags that proved to be crucial in generating uptake. Her first Podesta tweet (see Figure 3) used the hashtag #podestaEmails28 and managed to get over one thousand retweets and likes. In that post, Pettibone links to a thread from the infamous pro-Trump-reddit /r/The\_Donald as “proof” that the Democratic party organized pedophilia rings. The whole thread is based on one email from performance artist Marina Abramovic to John Podesta in which she says that she is ‘*looking forward to the Spirit Cooking dinner at my place*’ (Wikileaks 2016). In those tweets, Abramovic’s arty “dinner party” concepts called Spirit Cooking were de-contextualized. They were now read literally as an invitation for “occult/magic gatherings” where children were molested and murdered. Art—fiction—was turned into “reality.” This re-entextualization has had profound and powerful effects, as it was the start of a new conspiracy theory—Pizzagate—that would have a massive following in the next weeks and months.

This Wikileak was also the start of massive algorithmic work from right-wing actors (and the Russian Internet Research Agency) who used those emails to discredit the Clinton-campaign. The height of that campaign was reached on 4 November 2016. Pettibone’s use of the hashtag #PodestaEmails28 on that day shows her digital literacy. The hashtag not only followed the tweet format that Wikileaks set up, it tapped into a discourse that was trending at that moment (see Figure 4). Pettibone used this by then already familiar hashtag-format to tap into the hype of the day and lead thousands of people to the r/the\_donald page on Reddit.



**Figure 4.** Google Trends—Podesta Email Searches Worldwide.

The success of this post seemingly convinced Pettibone to make the Podesta emails, pedophilia, and the Democratic party into reoccurring topics. Three days later, on 7 November, the hashtag #pizzagate appeared for the first time<sup>8</sup>. Pettibone posted no more than eighteen tweets that day all digging up information from the Wikileaks leak on the “ring.” The next day, on the US election day of 2016, she posted a Tweet with the pizzagate hashtag<sup>9</sup>, claiming to be one of the first to use the hashtag<sup>10</sup>.

In less than one month, Pettibone developed a feel for hashtags and tapped into very successful ones like #DNCleak2, #spiritcooking, #ClintonCult, and #SavetheChildren. The success of these hashtags was not only a matter of organic uptake. Twitter found that 5% of the activity related to the #podestaemail hashtag came from bots (O’Sullivan 2018). The #spiritcooking hashtag was supported by the Russian internet agency (DiResta et al. 2019) and the #pizzagate hashtag was also pushed by extensive bot-activity, primarily focused on internationalizing the affaire (Guenon des Mesnards and Zaman 2018). This made pizzagate into a global phenomenon getting global traction. Pettibone’s hashtag tactics helped turn Brittany Pettibone, the aspiring teenage writer, into an influential political tweep playing a major role in spreading the #pizzagate conspiracy theory (Metaxas and Finn 2018).

Since her first pizzagate-tweet, all her pro-Trump tweets in that period gathered several thousand interactions. Pettibone played a central role, next to other key figures like Mike Cernovich, Jack Posobiac, InfoWars, MicroChips, and many other far-right tweeps, in the negative messaging campaign against Hillary Clinton, the Clinton Foundation, FBI director Comey, Soros, CNN, and the DNC. Her attack on Comey for instance, in November 2016, gathered more than 11,000 likes and shares. Her activity clearly fits in the larger campaign that surrounded Trump’s run for president in 2016.

By 1 December 2016, Pettibone managed to gather 34,000 followers on Twitter (see Figure 5). #Pizzagate and Trump’s campaign made Pettibone into a niched micro-celebrity on Twitter and created her fame as a “Pizzagate-expert” within alt-right circles in the US and identitarian circles on a global level. For instance, she was interviewed as a Pizzagate expert on “This Alt right life” with

<sup>8</sup> Fisher, M., Woodrow J., and Hermann, P. 2016. Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>9</sup> That tweet, and most others using that hashtag have been deleted by Pettibone or Twitter.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, M., Woodrow J., and Hermann, P. 2016. Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C. *The Washington Post*.

Matt Forney<sup>11</sup>, on Right On Radio<sup>12</sup>, on the Haggman Report, on the Altright.com website, and many others. Pizzagate became so big that legacy media started to report on it<sup>13</sup>, contributing to the amplification of the story and its actors. The army of rightwing activists, the different YouTube channels, together with 4chan trolls and bots, were able to steer the information flow, not only in their own niche, but in the hybrid media system on a global scale. Pizzagate is a textbook example of hybrid salience (Maniou and Bantimaroudis 2018). The conspiracy theory scored on all three dimensions of media salience—attention, prominence, and valence (Kiousis 2004), but only in the so-called alternative influence network (Lewis 2018). Even though Pizzagate was not taken up by mainstream media as truth, the mass media attention still contributed to the uptake and circulation of the conspiracy theory, its media salience for certain groups, and thus its political impact.

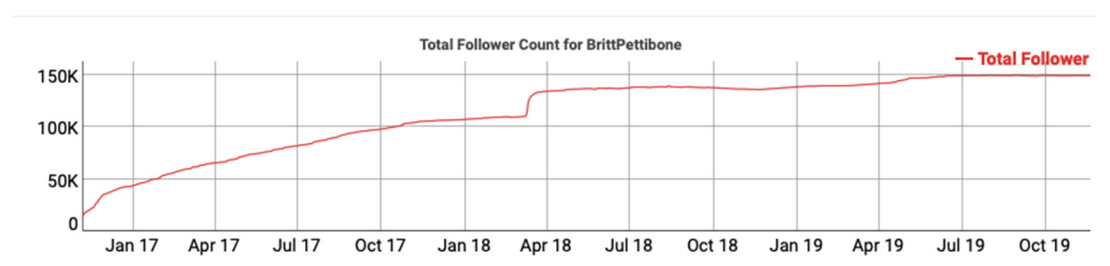


Figure 5. Total Twitter followers Brittany Pettibone—Social Blade.

## 6. Constructing Brittany Pettibone, the New Right Political YouTuber

In the same timeframe, Brittany Pettibone and her sister also set up a YouTube channel. This YouTube account was from the start deeply political. The first video the sisters published—*‘Why We’re Voting For Donald Trump’*—was an instant success realizing more than 10,000 views in less than one month. The video generated 545 likes and only 45 dislikes, indexes that they realized uptake by a very specific pro-Trump audience. By the end of November 2016, the Pettibone sisters managed to acquire almost 2000 subscribers. As announced in the caption of their first video, a series of political videos followed and they all mobilized far-right discourse directly targeting an already existing affective “alt-right” and identitarian public. The video titles *‘MSM: Weapon of Mass Deception’*<sup>14</sup>, *‘Political Correctness Will Enslave You’*<sup>15</sup>, *‘Why Hating Donald Trump Probably Means You Really Hate Hillary Clinton,’*<sup>16</sup> and *‘The Rise Of Anti-Whiteness’*<sup>17</sup> are emblematic for the integration of the Pettibone sisters in this far-right niche. Maybe more important: the videos and their metadata show that Pettibone has a thorough understanding not only of the accepted norms and discourses within that niche, but also of the affordances and norms of YouTube as a platform. Key tactics she mobilized were: (1) using her existing audience on Twitter as leverage (see Figure 6), (2) doing collaborations with more famous YouTubers, (3) producing content made for uptake in the niche, and last but not

<sup>11</sup> Forney, M. 2016. This Alt-Right Life, Episode 31: Inside #PizzaGate with Brittany Pettibone. This Altright Life. <https://anchor.fm/matt-forney/episodes/This-Alt-Right-Life--Episode-31-Inside-PizzaGate-with-Brittany-Pettibone-e2s2vj>

<sup>12</sup> Right on Radio. 2016. #31—Inside #PizzaGate with Brittany Pettibone. Listennotes.

<https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/right-on-radio/31-inside-pizzagate-with-8u7XiDBLZgQ/>

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Fisher, M., Woodrow J., and Hermann, P. 2016. Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>14</sup> Pettibone, B. 2016. MSM: Weapon of Mass Deception. YouTube. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161109200327/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm3kfCARZmY>

<sup>15</sup> Pettibone, B. 2016. Political Correctness Will Enslave You. YouTube. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161109190256/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CGyRJh4fUQ>

<sup>16</sup> Pettibone, B. 2016. Why Hating Donald Trump Probably Means You Really Hate Hillary Clinton. YouTube. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161125020726/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=230QXddITOI&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>17</sup> Pettibone, B. 2016d. The Rise of Anti-Whiteness. YouTube. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161109200245/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaUi0GWqzbQ>

least (4) focus on Search Engine and Recommendation Optimization. The combination of these four instruments made her account boom in a very short period of time.



**Figure 6.** Using Twitter as leverage for her YouTube channel.

In February 2017, her YouTube account only had 2600 followers—a sharp contrast with her Twitter base at the time. Nevertheless, 1000 visitors are enough to unlock new tools from YouTube to monetize and connect with your audience. As we can see in Figure 6, she actively used her Twitter account to direct tweeps to her YouTube channel. Throughout that month and in the course of the next months, her audience would very rapidly grow as she started a YouTube “podcast” (sic.) with Tara McCarthy under the banner “Virtue of the West.” These vlogs were introduced in the metadata of the first video as “a podcast” (sic.) ‘*dedicated to helping you reconnect with the traditional values that once made Western Civilization great, including but not limited to the glorification of the nuclear family, motherhood, masculinity, femininity, etiquette, traditional gender roles and love of one’s own culture, race and country*’<sup>18</sup>. Pettibone and her new co-host Tara McCarthy tried to create a female niche for themselves within the larger new right network. They shaped that niche by inviting all kinds of conservative, alt-right, pro-Trump and anti-feministic YouTube vloggers with an already established following. Lauren Southern, Millennial Woes, Black Pigeon Speaks, ‘Blonde In The Belly Of The Beast’, Trump supporter and Deploraball organizer Mike Cernovich and anti-politically correct vloggers Josephine and James O’Keefe were all guests.

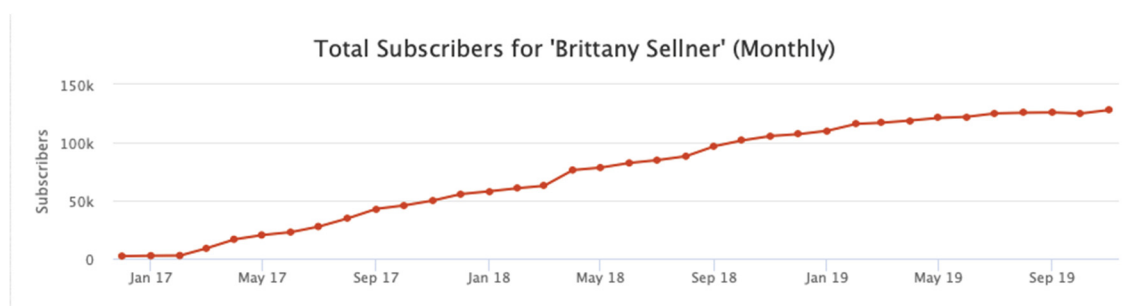
The videos were clearly produced for uptake in the Alternative Influence Network of far-right YouTubers (Lewis 2018). The first episodes were also syndicated on the then just started far-right platform Altright.com<sup>19</sup>. The content, the topics, the guests, the discourses and the look and feel of these first vlogs matched the norms of that niche at the time. The fake news of the MSM, anti-

<sup>18</sup> Pettibone, T.S. SN. Virtue of the West. <http://tspettibone.com/virtue-of-the-west/>

<sup>19</sup> See the vlogs on Altright.com: <https://altright.com/2017/02/15/virtue-of-the-west-podcast-tommy-robinson/>  
<https://altright.com/2017/03/01/virtue-of-the-west-black-pigeon-speaks/>  
<https://altright.com/2017/03/31/virtue-of-the-west-ricky-vaughn-and-the-internet-war/>

immigration, anti-feminism, the idea of anti-Whiteness and political correctness were all classic and hotly debated tropes within that niche at the time (Maly 2018a; Lewis 2018). More even, the keywords used in the titles of the videos also index the Search Engine Strategy. YouTube is more and more used to search for news and information in general (Smith et al. 2018). Metadata and especially the smart use of keywords is crucial to be found. Metadata provided in the title, tags, category, and the description of the video is also used '*for platform-specific recommendation systems*' (Golebiewski and boyd 2019). These recommendations are more and more important in driving traffic to one's channel.

Pettibone's channel has adopted both strategies in the hope of finding an audience. All videos came with extensive explanation in the meta-data, not only on the particular video, but also on the concept of the "podcast." The titles of the first collaboration videos she made with McCarthy all followed the format of 'A chat with ...' and the name of the guest. This almost guarantees that their video will pop up when users search for these already famous far-right YouTubers, and maybe more important: chances are high that the YouTube algorithms will recommend them to people already watching those figures. Whereas using names of fringe rightwing vloggers guarantees uptake within this specific niche, using highly popular keywords like Trump, Clinton, Islam, or Soros broadens the potential reach of the vlog. Surfing the wave of viral or hyped content by producing content dedicated to the hype of the moment is a classic influencer tactic (Hou 2018, p. 72), and Pettibone manages that game.



**Figure 7.** Total YouTube Subscribers Brittany Pettibone.

The tactic of doing collaborations (YouTube Creator Academy 2020) and interviews with already established alt-right vloggers, together with her content, her Twitter base and her carefully constructed meta-data resulted in a rapidly expanding audience for her channel. After the four February 2017 episodes that Pettibone made with McCarthy, her channel had four times more subscribers. And one month later she again doubled her subscribers to over 16,000 (see Figure 7). In a very short timeframe, she would not only attract audiences from different corners of the world, she would herself also start operating on a more global scale. Pettibone, together with the Canadian far-right YouTuber and activist Lauren Southern, started travelling to Europe and published vlogs on their travels and especially on the identitarian movements and their actions in Europe.

## 7. From Activist Tweep to Metapolitical Influencer

In less than one year after her first political tweet, Pettibone had acquired large visibility—a key value within the attention economy (García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2019)—within the global far-right niche. The name Brittany Pettibone had become a brand with a substantial audience of alt-right and identitarian activists. In the next months and years, she would capitalize on this position. Since May 2017, Pettibone started to craft her channel around her own personality. The banner 'Virtue of the West' was replaced by a professionally crafted intro positioning her name and her own logo.

Since April 2017, we also see that Pettibone more regularly starts to use her Instagram account, giving her followers more insight in "the back office" of her political activism and seemingly giving unfiltered access to her private life. This influencer practice is commonly understood as "networked intimacy." The concept was initially introduced to try to understand how people use digital media to make friends or to display intimacy in the context of social media (Miguel 2018). In relation to



influencers, it has gotten a slightly different meaning. Networked intimacy has become an instrument to bind audiences to the influencer and create a perception of authenticity.

Whereas in 2016 pictures on Pettibone's Instagram mostly showed typical family pictures, we see a clear break in 2017. From her invite to Trump's inauguration, over selfies with Lauren Southern to her performance at the Free Speech Rally in Berkeley in April 2017: Instagram was now regularly used to give her fans a look behind the scenes of her activist life. With the exception of some old #TBT pictures—showing her travelling with friends, celebrating her dog's birthday and pictures with her family—most pictures were now carefully staged and stylized to contribute to her brand as an "important activist." The intimacy of these "old family" #TBT photos were re-entextualized in a political context and blended with more glamorous pictures reminiscent of fashion shoots with behind the scenes pictures and stories on her political activism. Influencers, Hou (2019) argues, try to create an aura of authenticity through the (interactive) representation of the intimate and private self. A practice Hou calls staged authenticity. A good example of how Pettibone uses staged authenticity for metapolitical goals is her wedding. In the weeks and months before her wedding with Martin Sellner (see Figure 8)—a key figure within the pan-European identitarian movement Generation Identity—followers on her Instagram could see her getting her wedding ring sized, kissing Martin Sellner on a carriage under the caption '*Du bist die liebe meines lebens,*' and pictures of both giving their wedding vows in a church on the Austrian countryside.



Figure 8. Marriage picture of Martin Sellner and Brittany Pettibone.

All these pictures and captions provide her followers with deeply intimate information. Like all—non-political—influencers, Pettibone mobilizes this aura of authenticity strategically to create a bond with her audience (Gaden and Dumitrica 2015), giving them the feeling that they really know Pettibone. The difference with non-political influencers is that networked intimacy and strategic authenticity are now being mobilized in support for metapolitical goals. This metapolitical dimension becomes clear when we see how her Instagram account works in synchrony with her YouTube channel. On her YouTube channel, we see the same wedding picture reappearing when Pettibone posts a vlog with the title “3 Reasons Marriage Is A Risk (And Why We Still Took It)”<sup>20</sup> (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. YouTube video on Marriage.

The same romantic wedding picture of the couple in traditional clothing is now edited and being used as a thumbnail on YouTube (Figure 9). The title of the video is seemingly unpolitical. The SEO of this video is made or at least has the potential for uptake in a very different niche by a potential very different audience (people who are interested in marriage and maybe have doubts). The video shows the couple on the last day of their honeymoon. First on a boat in Italy where they make the joke that now that Salvini is out of office, someone has to make sure the waters are safe of illegal immigrants. Later, they film from one of the Italian beaches. Sitting on a beach bed, they address their viewers, with a beer and a café latte in hand, and again with a small joke that the beaches are safe. When they start discussing marriage and why they did it, they are seemingly just rationally talking about all potential problems in marriage. They discuss three questions (1) Is it responsible for right-wing activists to marry and have children considering their precarious financial situation, (2) Is it responsible to set children in this world as right-wing activists, and (3) a more general one, should you really bind oneself to one person for the rest of your life.

<sup>20</sup> Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019. 3 Reasons Marriage Is A Risk (And Why We Still Took It). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPzBG3N-8Po&t=894s>

Throughout the discussion we see two main frames. The first one is a traditional understanding of marriage and gender roles. In an ideal marriage, the man is the one that goes out working and provides food on the table. The wife is supposed to dedicate her life in service of the children and the family. These traditional gender roles are constantly flagged throughout the video and Pettibone explicitly states that she would leave the political life *'and obviously prioritize motherhood once I have children'*<sup>21</sup>. It is also flagged by the fact that Pettibone decided to adopt Sellner as her last name since their marriage.

The second frame explicitly and implicitly constructs a world dominated by "the left." All questions related to the family and marriage start from the idea they live as far-right activists in a "left-wing" dominated world. This meta-frame is highlighted in "the left," "the globalists," and "Soros-funded organizations" in particular who they claim are trying to de-platform them, prosecute them and cancel their "bank accounts." This dominance of "the left" is also highlighted in the fact that marriage, in today's Western societies, is not sacred anymore, that people divorce and that even poly-amorous relationships are promoted. All of this is framed as a consequence of the consumption culture that the left, and especially liberals, have promoted.

The personal, the networked intimacy and the staged authenticity, are deeply political. It is through displaying their personal story—the staged back office of their activist life—that they normalize their political goals, or better, metapoliticize them. This is all the more obvious when Martin Sellner explicitly states that having children is a political act in itself, because not having children *'is exactly what they—our enemies—want'*<sup>22</sup>, *'It is a kind of revolutionary act,'* it is a kind of *'in your face against the modern world, all the globalists'*<sup>23</sup> who don't want you to marry. Within the new right and broader, the anti-Enlightenment tradition and radical nationalism, 'the family' is seen as the corner-stone of the nation, of the community. It is the family that ties the ethno-cultural community with the blood and soil ideology. The prominent trope in the right discourse about the so-called degenerate of society, is not only the result of migration and diversity, but also of the destruction of the family by individualism and globalism. As Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier state in their new right manifesto, it is on the local level of *'the family, the neighborhood, the village, the city, the professions' (...)* that one can create a standard of living worthy of human beings, not a fragmented life<sup>24</sup>. The family, in new right discourse, is of course highly politicized. Not all families matter. The family is here understood as a building block of the homogeneous society and rests on traditional values and traditional gender roles<sup>25</sup>. The family—in new right discourse—is the antipode of the individual in an Enlightenment discourse. Here we see that key ingredients of blood and soil nationalist discourse are still organizing contemporary new right metapolitics: the family is the blood-and soil building block of the homogenous (white) community.

The display of intimacy is directly connected to the new right political agenda. The inside view in their honeymoon gives the viewers the feeling of being part of their lives and constructs a figure of dedication. Even on their honeymoon they think about their followers and their political goals. They sacrifice themselves for their cause. The content is also used, just like all other social media content that they produce, to raise money. Most videos they produce not only come with calls to share and to subscribe, but also to donate. In some of her videos, Pettibone even explicitly asks and argues why it is important to donate<sup>26</sup>. The wedding video is no exception (see Figure 10). The issue

<sup>21</sup> Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019. 3 Reasons Marriage Is A Risk (And Why We Still Took It). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPzBG3N-8Po&t=894s>

<sup>22</sup> Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019. 3 Reasons Marriage Is A Risk (And Why We Still Took It). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPzBG3N-8Po&t=894s>, min. 10:17 -11:15min

<sup>23</sup> Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019a. 3 Reasons Marriage Is A Risk (And Why We Still Took It). *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPzBG3N-8Po&t=894s>, min. 14:38 -11:15min

<sup>24</sup> de Benoist, A. & Champetier, C. 2000. *Manifesto of the French New Right In The Year 2000*. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5388/a0f125887a784acd36b2d2166705d42ae678.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> See for instance: Faye, G. *Archeofuturism*. London: Arktos and Faye, Guillaume. 2011. *Why we fight. Manifesto of the European resistance*. London: Arktos.

<sup>26</sup> Pettibone (Sellner), B. 2019c. The War on men. *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBjMuilQxFg>, last 30 minutes.



of de-platforming/demonetizing is raised and the video description links to several platforms (PayPal and Stripe in this case) to support their activism and buy her new book. Note also that each video she posts comes (see also Figure 10) with links to all her other channels on mainstream and less mainstream digital channels. In this way, she tries to build an audience on these platforms in the hope to not only have more reach, but also prepare for potential de-platforming.

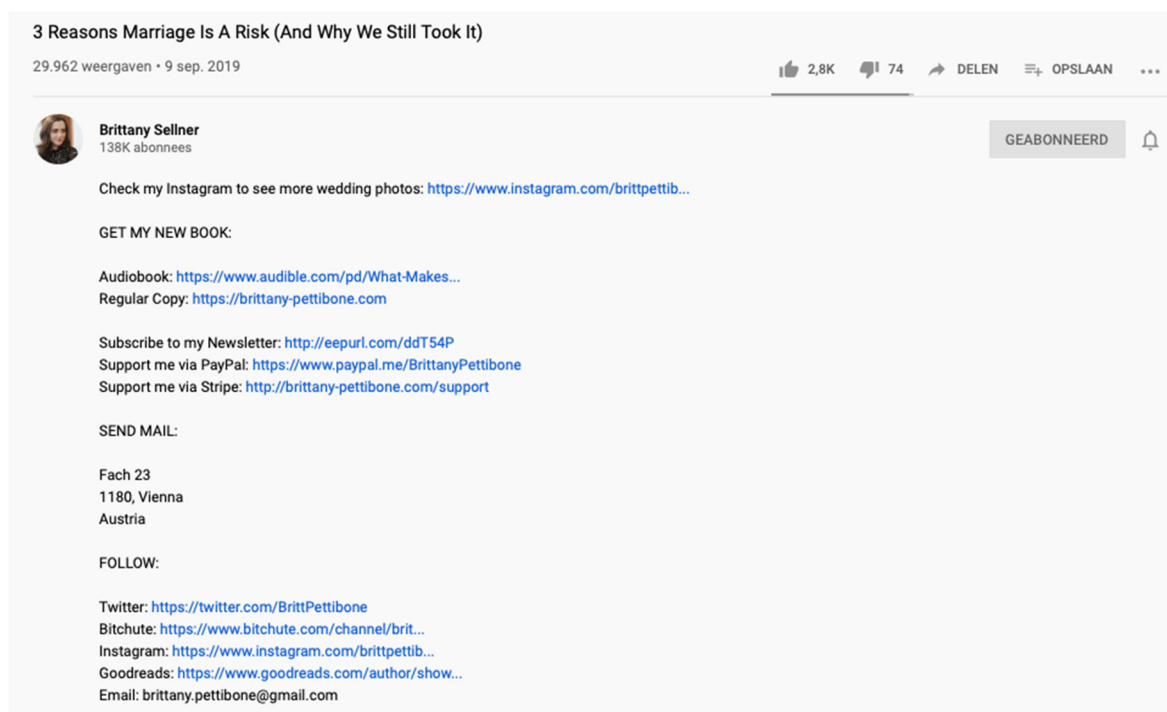


Figure 10. Hypermediacy and activism.

## 8. Family and Relation Advice as Metapolitics

Since her marriage, the purely political content has become less prominent. Since her marriage vlog, she posted 17 videos on a wide range of topics: 'Abortion as a moral good,' 'The war on men,' 'What makes Women great,' 'Why young people are unhappy,' 'Man Won't Date "Woke" Women', 'Should Women Propose Marriage To Men?', 'Or 'Twitter Mob Attacks Mom For Posting Cute Family Photo.' Eleven of these posts deal with relationships and gender-related topics. The family, marriage, love, happiness, dating, abortion, and (white) women and (white) men in general are now key topics on her channel. Even though all these videos seemingly deal with relational topics, they are all deeply (meta)political.

No matter what the topic really is, they all promote a narrative on the so-called dominance of the "woke" and "lunatic left." A world where feminists and anti-racists are willingly destroying the traditional family, marriage, and the traditional gender roles of (white) men and women. She describes a world in decay. That decay is visible in the attack on the traditional gender roles, the destruction of the community and especially the war on men. 'While feminism may claim to have interest in realizing equality,' Pettibone broadcasts, 'it has shown itself to be far more interested in usurping the traditional male role and that is a war of sort that has been started. Boys and men are not only shamed and belittled for their masculine qualities, their masculinity is deemed toxic, a danger to society even. Meanwhile the feminization of boys and men is upheld, praised and defended. Gone are the days were men valued and respected for their desire to protect and to lead and their societal contributions<sup>27</sup>. 'Not even father-days is safe any longer from the destructive hands of our brave new woke culture'<sup>28</sup>. This "left"-wing discourse is

<sup>27</sup> Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019b. What makes Women great? *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMj11pLGkaU>, min: 9:45

<sup>28</sup> Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019b. What makes Women great? *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMj11pLGkaU>, min: 09:59

presented as the norm in society and thus as all powerful, their discourse is carried by ‘the most powerful institutions: the media, education and entertainment’<sup>29</sup>.

In contrast, Brittany Sellner portrays herself as the voice of reason or common sense, taking a seemingly middle ground position<sup>30</sup>. When she for instance attacks the #metoo movement, she doesn’t do it full frontal, but in a smart, hedged way: ‘I do not claim that society has no need for a movement like the #metoo—movement’, say Pettibone, ‘but if these movements truly do want to accomplish something, they need to be concerned with evidence, fair trails and shining light on all forms of violence, including the violence that affects men’<sup>31</sup>. Such attacks come with identity effects. She constructs herself as the opposite of the caricature she makes of the #metoo movement. Contrary to them, she positions herself as fair, balanced, and only producing evidence-based discourse. This position is reinforced by showing tweets, newspaper, and website articles to “prove” her discourse. She also includes links to her sources in the bio of the video. This way of working reminds us of how successful far-right YouTubers like Joseph Paul Watson (Maly 2020b) or Lauren Southern operate. They also carefully construct an aura of “evidence-based” discourse to construct their very own idiosyncratic political narrative on the basis of assembling facts, fiction, lies, and news taken out of context and re-textualized in a very different narrative. This type of media literacy—the careful production of political junk news instead of outright fake news (Venturini 2019)—enables them to comply to the community standards of YouTube and thus stay integrated in the digital mainstream and to let their metapolitical discourse circulate.

Important to realize is that Pettibone’s metapolitical discourse is not new at all, but has roots in a two-century old tradition of the anti-Enlightenment. Just like in the anti-Enlightenment tradition, in fascist and new right discourse (Sternhell 2010; Griffin 2008), “the Liberals” and “the left”—in short, the Enlightenment, Universalism, and Individualism—are seen as destroying traditions, the family, and the separation of the sexes. This metapolitical work was always done in order to build a new society where traditional values are again put central. ‘We have allowed our society to regress to such a disoriented state, that trying to recover it, would likely take decades and a concerted effort by many many courageous people’<sup>32</sup>. In the conservative revolutionary tradition (Sternhell 2010; Mohler 2018; Herf 1984), decline is never just accepted: new right metapolitical actors see themselves as the vanguard, the elites who are actively constructing the future<sup>33</sup>. And just like all conservative revolutionaries, Pettibone argues that this way forward is found in ‘finding, a strong, stable and tighten real life community’<sup>34</sup> built on clear gender roles that celebrate the ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ of men and women.

Brittany Pettibone’s seemingly non-political content is deeply (meta)-political. It is produced as part of the larger new right metapolitical battle. This political goal cleverly takes the form of self-help content on relations, identity, love, and family. The niche that Pettibone is carving out for herself is very similar to the one that people like Mike Cernovich and the academic Jordan Peterson are tapping into. Their success is to a large extent built on a very specific niche of young men and women in search for answers, comfort, and self-worth. This niche of “Angry White Men,” as Kimmel (2013) calls it, has, over the last decades become a substantial electorate and thus a very powerful and profitable niche. Pettibone targets this niche and taps or construct a new one: women and girls who are also struggling in this world. This is the setup of Pettibone’s 2018 book. ‘What makes us girls’ is

<sup>29</sup> Pettibone (Sellner), B. 2019c. The War on men. *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBjMuiIQxFg>, min: 10:27

<sup>30</sup> see for instance: Pettibone (Sellner), Brittany. 2019c. The War on men. *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBjMuiIQxFg>, min: 7:59 and Pettibone, (Sellner), B. 2019b. What makes Women great? *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMj11pLGkaU>

<sup>31</sup> Pettibone (Sellner), B. 2019c. The War on men. *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBjMuiIQxFg>, min: 7:30-7:59

<sup>32</sup> Pettibone (Sellner), B. 2019c. The War on men. *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBjMuiIQxFg>, min: 10: 27

<sup>33</sup> Faye, G. 2011. Why we fight. Manifesto of the European resistance. London: Arktos.

<sup>34</sup> Pettibone (Sellner), B. 2019c. The War on men. *Youtube* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBjMuiIQxFg>, min: 10: 27

wrapped in a meta-story of trying to help young girls finding their destiny by sharing her personal story<sup>35</sup>. At the same time, it is a metapolitical book. These metapolitical goals are seldom recognized, and the book is sold at major outlets like Amazon and Wordery as a health and lifestyle book. Such a categorization is of course very powerful from a metapolitical point of view: it normalizes the metapolitical goals. This is not about politics, but about health. The publication of that book in turn allowed her to appear on many different YouTube channels but now as an author dedicated to making young girls happy.

## 9. Conclusions: Metapolitics 2.0 and the Digital Ecology

Pettibone's rise to micro-celebrity stardom within the global new right was not only the result of her pro-Trump content in full election time, but also an effect of (her use and understanding of) the affordances of digital media. Her media literacy and the interaction of humans and non-humans in particular, enabled her to become a new right influencer. Her hashtag tactics especially allowed her to reach an ever expanding audience. The prominence of Pettibone was at first closely connected to her political activity on Twitter and her Twitter audience was deeply integrated into a local niche of right-wing supporters for Trump, but this globalized quickly. She became a key figure within the global new right network (Maly 2018a, 2018c). This network is a translocal and polycentric network of intellectuals, activists, movements, and vloggers dedicated to new right metapolitics (Nagle 2017; Maly 2018a, 2018b, 2019). They all reproduce key elements of the so-called anti-Enlightenment tradition (Sternhell 2010; Maly 2018e) in its post-WWII new right and identitarian manifestation: organicism, celebration of inequality, anti-materialism, anti-feminism, organic homogeneous groups, and anti-leftness (Maly 2020c).

Their success is at least partially due to their knowledge and use of mainstream digital platforms. The programmed connectivity (van Dijck 2013) and the system of personalization, datafication, and vanity metrics helps new right influencers to construct a niche, so-called "echo-chambers," that create fertile ground for a metapolitical battle. The voice of the metapolitical influencer is produced in a very specific socio-technical context. If they integrate themselves successfully in the socio-technical culture of the platform, they become full members of the attention economy and the platform will contribute to the uptake of their metapolitical battle. Metapolitical influencers are not just "using" these digital media to have impact and reach. Their integration in the ecology of mainstream digital media contributes to the monetization of the audience labour they activate. This partially explains why known far-right influencers and conspiracy theorists like Joseph Paul Watson, but also Pettibone and Southern can stay active for so long on YouTube and Twitter. The "micro-celebritization" of metapolitics is a phenomenon that is directly linked to the neoliberal capitalist ideology underpinning the current digital ecology. Their integration and understanding of this ecology explains their impact at least partially. It is the technical construction of digital media and their personalization strategies in relation to influencer practices that shape echo chambers, or as Ledwich and Zaitsev (2020) call it: radical bubbles. These radical bubbles are not just algorithmic products. They are socio-technical assemblages and thus depend on the algorithms and the media literacy of influencers.

Whereas Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier<sup>36</sup> understood "metapolitics" in relation to elite right-wing intellectuals, we see that this traditional conception of metapolitics has been stretched today. In our post-digital times<sup>37</sup>, we see that intellectuals, activists, politicians, and prosumers all imagine themselves as meta-political actors. The "democratization" of content production facilitated by digital media has clear effects on the metapolitical production—or "input-side." Thompson (2020, p. 21) already stressed that the new forms of action and interaction enabled by digital media—"mediated online interaction" as he calls it—have a fundamental impact on the political field. The

<sup>35</sup> Pettibone, B. 2018. *What makes us girls: and why it's all worth it*. Adelaide: Reason books. pp. 4–7

<sup>36</sup> de Benoist, Alain & Champetier, Charles. 2000. *Manifesto of the French New Right In The Year 2000*. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5388/a0f125887a784acd36b2d2166705d42ae678.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Cramer introduces the concept of post-digital to highlight that the digital revolution has occurred and is now a 'normal' part of societies around the world.

same is true for the metapolitical field. More concretely, digitalization disrupts ‘the settled roles’ of the institutional gatekeepers: “The power of the established media organizations to shape the agenda is disrupted by the emergences of a plethora of new players who are able to use communication media to interact with others while bypassing the established channels of mediated quasi interaction” (Thompson 2020, p. 21). As a result, “information,” leaks, scandals, and junk news (Venturini 2019) are abundantly present in the current digital ecology. These changing power relationships in the media field disrupt common understandings of media salience and shape all kinds of metapolitical opportunities.

Digital media not only enables new actors to become part of the metapolitical battle. They also affect “the input.” Digital messages are not just distributed but also shaped and altered by digital media (van Dijck 2013, p. 29), they (re)shape and re-organize the communicative structure of the “input”-discourse (Maly 2018b). As a result, metapolitics has escaped the formats of the paper, the journal, or congresses, and is now also distributed in the form of memes, podcasts, blogs, and vlogs. Understanding Search Engine Optimization and gaming the system is now an essential ingredient of any metapolitical battle. If activists succeed in integrating themselves in the media culture of a certain platform and follow the norms, they can successfully use that platform for their metapolitical goals.

Not only the input, but also the uptake has changed profoundly in the digital ecology. Active uptake of ideas is of crucial importance for any metapolitical project in post-digital times (Maly 2020c). Uptake refers to (1) the fact that within the digital ecology users are not only consumers but also (re)producers of discourse, so-called prosumers (Miller 2011) and (2) that algorithms and the interfaces of digital media play an important role in the dissemination and reproduction of ideas (see Maly 2019a, 2020c). Uptake through human and non-human actors (from bots to the algorithms organizing the communication on a platform) has become a crucial part of any political and metapolitical battle. Metapolitical messaging in the digital age is thus not a linear process between sender (the intellectual) and receiver (the people), but involves a multitude of human and non-human actors that are all potential senders and receivers. This “uptake” is as crucial as the input.

New right metapolitics 2.0 (Maly 2019b) is thus defined by the affordances (in a socio-technical understanding) and interfaces of digital media. The contemporary metapolitical strategies of new right actors are not only visible in the classic metapolitical structures influenced by *La Nouvelle Droite*—think things like Spencer’s National Policy Institute, congresses, books, papers, and essays—they are also embedded in digital culture: in vlogs, memes, and offline practices influenced by digital culture and in political activism in general. The far-right has not only technologically integrated itself, it has also culturally integrated their metapolitical battle in the digital mainstream. Weddings and relation advice on YouTube can now become powerful pathways to far-right radicalization. The rise of far-right ideas, movements, and parties seems to indicate that this new digital metapolitical battle has impact. It is thus important to understand and direct research towards these new digital metapolitical strategies in relation to the circulation of information flows in the digital ecology. Ideological, discourse-analytical, and radicalization research not only needs to focus on the content, but also on the different actors and the systems of communication if one wants to understand how the digital metapolitical battle occurs in post-digital times.

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